

## ***The HOLY MARTYRS of UGANDA***

(†1885, †1886, †1887)

These Saints lived in the area of Central Africa called Uganda. Never had anyone spoken the name of God in that land, and the devil ruled there by means of slavery, sorcery and cannibalism. One day in 1879, Father Lourdel and Father Livinhac, two members of the White Fathers' Society, arrived amid these poor natives. At once they introduced themselves to King Mutesa, who welcomed them peacefully and granted them permission to reside in his kingdom.

The dedicated missionaries were all to all, and they rendered service any way they could. Less than seven months after they opened a catechumenate, they selected some individuals worthy of preparation for Baptism. King Mutesa took an interest in what the Fathers were preaching, but before long their words aroused the anger of the jealous witch doctors and of the Arabs, who were engaging in slavery.

Anticipating a persecution, Fathers Lourdel and Livinhac baptized the natives who were already prepared and then withdrew south of Lake Victoria with a few young Blacks they had bought out of slavery. A smallpox epidemic decimated the population of that area, and the missionaries baptized great numbers of dying children.

After they had been three years in exile, King Mutesa passed away. His son, Mwanga, who was in favor of the new religion, asked them to return. On July 12, 1885, the inhabitants of Uganda, who had not forgotten the multiple benefits they had received from the missionaries, gave Fathers Lourdel and Livinhac a triumphant welcome. The Blacks they had baptized before their departure had baptized others in turn; their apostolate promised to be a flourishing one. However, the new king's minister felt intimidated by the Christians' success, especially that of the leader of the pages, Joseph Mukasa, who opposed the prevalent immorality.

This young man was the friend and confidant of the king and could easily have become the second most important person in the kingdom. His only ambition, however, was to fulfill the teachings of Christ in himself and in his companions. The minister convinced the young king that the Christians wanted to seize his throne; the witch doctors insisted that the supposed conspirators be punished by death at once. Mwanga yielded to these false accusations, and on November 15, 1885, he had Joseph Mukasa burned to death.

The tyrant boasted, "After I've killed that one, all the others will be afraid and will abandon the religion of the priests." Contrary to this prediction, however, conversions

continued to abound. On the night of Joseph's martyrdom, twelve catechumens requested the favor of Baptism. Another 105 catechumens were baptized during the week following Joseph's death, some of whom would later be numbered among the eleven future martyrs.

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, six months after the odious murder of Joseph, the king returned from a hunt and summoned one of his pages, Dennis, age 14. Mwanga questioned him and learned that he was studying catechism with Mwafu, a baptized boy. He flew into a rage and thrust his poisoned spear through the boy's throat. The executioners completed the task the following day, May 26<sup>th</sup>, on which the despot officially declared open persecution against the Christians.

The same day Mwanga had young Honoratus mutilated and tortured, and a neophyte named James, who had once attempted to convert Mwanga to Christianity, had a yoke hung around his neck. Then Mwanga assembled all the Christian pages and gave orders for them to be led to the pyre in Namugongo and burned alive. James died in that fire along with the other martyrs on June 3, 1886, on the feast of the Ascension. Father Lourdel later wrote:

"Those between 18 and 25 years old were tied together. The younger boys, bound tightly together, could hardly walk without jostling one another. I saw little Kizito laughing at all the scrimmaging as though it were some kind of a game he was playing with his friends." There were fifteen Catholics in all, three of whom were released at the last minute. There are twenty-two officially canonized Catholic martyrs, whose deaths occurred between 1885 and 1887.

On May 26, 1886, on its way to the torture site, the condemned group encountered a young man named Pontian. The head executioner asked him, "Do you know how to pray?" Pontian answered in the affirmative; the torturer pierced him with a spear and cut off his head. When nighttime fell, each of the martyrs was immobilized in a yoke; the chief executioner's son was forced to leave the group of victims and return home. After a long, exhausting trek in which they received untold mistreatment, the captives reached Namugongo on May 27<sup>th</sup>. A hundred or so torturers divided the prisoners among themselves.

The cruel executioners labored until June 3<sup>rd</sup> to gather all the wood needed for the fire. Thus the prisoners had to wait six long days — long days filled with privation and suffering, and cold, sleepless nights filled with ardent prayer, while awaiting the death that would come to crown their heroic combat. The beating of the tom-toms throughout

the night of June 2<sup>nd</sup> told the languishing martyrs, bound in their huts, that the immense fire of their supreme holocaust would soon be lit.

Charles Lwanga, a young man of great strength and agility, had been appointed by the king to direct a group of pages; he had taught them catechism in hiding. He was now separated from his companions to be burned in an especially terrible manner. The torturer lit the fire in such a way as to burn the feet of his victim first. "You're burning me," said Charles, "but it's like water you're pouring to wash me." When the flames reached the area of his heart, just before he expired, Charles murmured, "My God! My God!"

As the group of martyrs drew near the fire, a triumphant cry resounded: Mbagala, the chief executioner's son, had succeeded in running away from home to fly to his martyrdom. He was jumping with joy upon finding himself once again in the company of his friends. He was struck down with a hammer, then rolled along with the others into reed mats as the executioners prepared to throw them into the fire.

After the torturers had burned their feet, they promised to release them promptly if they would give up praying. But these heroes did not fear the death of the body. Faced with a categorical refusal to apostatize, the torturers lit the fire. Above the roaring of the great fire and the clamor of the bloodthirsty executioners, the prayers of the holy martyrs rose up calm, ardent and serene: "Our Father, who art in heaven..." The executioners knew they were dead when they stopped praying.

The last of the martyrs was called John Mary. He had been obliged to live in hiding for a long time; finally, tired of his wandering life, he conceived an ardent desire to die for his faith. Despite the advice of his friends, who attempted to dissuade him from his project, John Mary decided to go and speak to King Mwanga. No one ever saw him again; on January 27, 1887, Mwanga had him beheaded and thrown into a pond.

Popular devotion to the Martyrs of Uganda took on a universal character after Saint Pius X proclaimed them Venerable on August 16, 1912. Their beatification occurred on June 6, 1920, and they received the honors of canonization on October 18, 1964.

**Sources:** *Vivante Afrique*, Namur: Sept.-Oct. 1964, No. 234, pp. 1-61; Marteau de Langle de Cary, 1959, Vol. II, pp. 305-308.